



Chapter

1

Introduction: What Is Anthropology?



Warm-up Activities

- 1 What is your general understanding of anthropology? Do you know if there are any similar academic fields in China?
- 2 What are your purpose and expectations of learning about anthropology?



1. Introduction

The word “anthropology” is of Greek origin: *anthrop* means human beings, and *ology* means study. Literally speaking, anthropology is the study of human beings. Then, what has made anthropology distinct from other disciplines which also study human beings, such as sociology, history, psychology, philosophy, and linguistics? The answer is that anthropology takes a holistic approach to systematically study human beings. Among all the disciplines concerning human beings, anthropology has the broadest scope. This can be understood from three main perspectives:

- Anthropology is concerned with all human groups regardless of their age, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, language, political affiliations, and socio-economic status.
- Anthropology has the deepest time frame, i.e., it studies humans from the very beginning, the remote past, to the recent past, the present, and even into the future.
- Anthropology covers all aspects of human life—social, linguistic, religious, political, economic, psychological, etc.

Since anthropology takes such a broad perspective, there are four traditional subfields as follows:

- **Physical/Biological anthropology** considers human beings as a biological species.
- **Archaeology** is concerned with humanity's past through the analysis of human remains.
- **Linguistic anthropology** is the study of the interaction between language and culture.
- **Cultural anthropology** is the examination of similarities and differences between cultures.

There is a fifth emerging subfield, **applied anthropology**, that applies anthropological theories and methods to real life issues/problems. We will address applied anthropology in Chapter 16. Next, we will briefly go over each of the four traditional subfields one by one.



2. Physical/Biological Anthropology

Physical/Biological anthropology considers human beings as a biological species. It covers a wide range of topics, including the mechanisms of biological evolution, genetic inheritance, human adaptability and variation, primatology, primate morphology, and fossil records of human evolution. Of various topics, physical anthropologists are mainly concerned with two issues: **human evolution** and **human variation**.

Where did we come from? How did human beings evolve into what we look like in the present? What are the biological links between us and primates? These are important questions physical anthropologists have been working on. Generally speaking, there are two major methods to study human evolution as follows:

- **Paleoanthropology** is the comparative analysis of fossil records of early human beings and their predecessors. By applying a sophisticated set of techniques, physical anthropologists are able to identify, date, compare, and analyze fossil bones so as to determine the biological links between *Homo sapiens* and their ancestors. For example, the **Out of Africa Hypothesis** proposes that all non-African modern human beings are of African origin and are descendants of populations who migrated out of East Africa after *Homo sapiens* emerged between 300,000 and 200,000 years ago (Johanson & White, 1979).
- **Primatology** is the study of living primates, such as chimpanzees, gorillas, and monkeys. By examining the biological and social characteristics of primates, primatologists are able to provide insights into how early human beings made similar adjustments to the similar natural environment. For instance, Jean Goodall is one of the most well-known primatologists to study chimpanzees in Africa.

The second major area of interest is human variation. What are the biological

variations found among human groups? How did such variations take place? Is race a scientific concept? To answer these questions, physical anthropologists are working on various specialized areas, such as human anatomy, population genetics, and human ecology. For instance, human ecology is concerned with the interaction between human body and nature. It aims to examine how human's adaptation to different physical worlds has brought about various biological features, such as skin pigmentation and body stature. For instance, people living close to the equator have much darker skin than those who live close to the Arctic region as a result of protection from the ultra-violet radiation. In regard to body stature, the Inuit who live in an extremely cold climate are short and stocky so as to preserve heat, while the Ethiopians and the Nigerians usually have slim and slender stature to cope with the hot weather.



3. Archaeology

Archaeology may be the most well-known subfield within anthropology thanks to movies and games related to tomb raiding or treasure hunting. Archaeologists use material remains to speculate about what happened in the past (as shown in Picture 1 on Page 229). Generally speaking, there are three kinds of remains:

- **Artifacts** are objects made or modified by human beings and can be readily removed from the dig site to labs for further analysis, such as pottery, arrow heads, and jewelry.
- **Features** are also made or modified by human beings but cannot be carried away from the dig site, such as house foundations, cave art, and giant Roman columns.
- **Ecofacts** are things that are neither made nor modified by human beings but used by them, such as animal bones and beads. Ecofacts usually provide insights into how human beings interacted with their environment and how they used natural resources.

Archaeology also covers various topics. The following is a short list of some major areas of interest:

- **Prehistorical archaeology** is concerned with people without written documentation or oral history. Therefore, material remains become the most important source of studying humanity's past. For instance, prehistoric archaeologists study how the Peking men made stone tools as well as when the first group of human beings arrived in North America.
- **Historical archeology** is the study of people who had written documentation or oral history. For example, historic archaeologists work closely with historians to figure out how Admiral Zheng He made seven voyages to Southeast Asia, the Indian Sea, and

even the east coast of Africa in the early 15th century as well as what happened in the Southern plantations in the United States during the 18th century.

- **Classical archaeology** concerns the investigation of the Mediterranean civilizations of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome. For example, classical archaeologists examine the influence of Ancient Greek culture in the Middle East and Egypt.
- **Cultural resource management (CRM)** is the identification, evaluation, and possible excavation of archaeological sites before a construction project occurs. For instance, if something underground is discovered when people build a railway, archaeologists are recruited to determine whether there is a need to preserve the site or not. CRM is a prime example of applied anthropology which we will discuss in Chapter 16.



4. Linguistic Anthropology

Linguistic anthropology, or anthropological linguistics, is the study of humanness through the lens of language, i.e., the role of language in forging and sustaining cultural practices and social structures. In Chapter 5, we will discuss this subfield in detail. The following is a short list of some major areas of interest within linguistic anthropology:

- **Historical linguistics** is the study of the evolution of world languages and the genetic links among them. For instance, a great number of languages, including English, German, Spanish, Russian, Hindi, and Sanskrit, belong to the same Indo-European language family. This implies that all the languages above historically share a common ancestral language, the Proto-Indo-European language.
- **Ethnolinguistics** is the study of the relationship between language and culture, i.e., how cultural differences are reflected in the language system. For instance, the Inuit have many words to describe snow and ice; a rich vocabulary about automobiles is developed in American culture.
- **Cognitive linguistics** is the study of the interaction between language and cognition. There is an ongoing debate on the interrelationship among language, cognition, and culture. Some scholars take a universalist perspective to highlight the similarities across cultures, and others support the relativist approach to focus on linguistic and cultural differences. For instance, according to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, language is not just a neutral means of communication; rather, it influences human perception of the sensible world.
- **Sociolinguistics** is the study of language variation and its social significance. For example, sociolinguists are interested in how gender ideologies are reflected

in linguistic behavior. As discussed in Chapter 5, American women are more likely to engage in rapport talk to forge connections, while American men tend to interpret communication as report talk to jostle for position and status (Tannen, 1990).

- **Pragmatics** is the study of language in use and linguistic communication. For example, in the utterance “I can hear someone talking”, the same sentence could be interpreted in different ways depending on contextual factors such as participants, setting, topic, and function. Thus, pragmatics is concerned with the relation of signs to their interpreters or users.



5. Cultural Anthropology

Cultural anthropology is the study of human culture and society through examination, analysis, and interpretation of social and cultural similarities and differences. It covers a wide range of topics. The following is a short list of some main specialized areas:

- **Medical anthropology** is the study of the relationship of biological and socio-cultural factors to health, disease, and illness. For instance, medical anthropologists are actively working with local and global communities to fight against AIDS in South Africa. We will revisit medical anthropology in Chapters 15 and 16.
- **Economic anthropology** is the study of how goods and services are produced, distributed, and consumed among various cultures. In Chapter 7, we will discuss economic systems all over the world and learn that not every culture aims to maximize profit. Instead, among some small-scale cultures, such as Native American groups along the Northwest Coast, wealth needs to be redistributed to affirm status.
- **Anthropology of religion** is the study of supernatural beliefs, practices, and rituals found across the globe. In Chapter 13, we will learn how they serve sociological and psychological functions within specific cultural contexts. For instance, Hinduism has played an important role in traditional Indian society in controlling human behavior and resolving conflicts among various social groups.
- **Political anthropology** is the study of how human groups are integrated into various political organizations and what measures are used to control human behavior. In Chapter 12, we will discuss four types of political organizations (band, tribe, chiefdom, and state) and learn why coercion is usually absent in small-scale, less complex cultures.
- **Educational anthropology** is the application of anthropological theories

and methods to the study of educational institutions, practices, and problems. For example, TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) is the application of cultural anthropology into teaching English to speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

- **Psychological anthropology** is the study of how culture influences the psychological make-up of the members of the society. Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead are two pioneer anthropologists within this field. For instance, Benedict, during World War II, led a group of researchers to carry out national character studies among the Japanese, the Germans, and the Italians to figure out how their specific cultural patterns pushed these three cultural groups to wage wars against other groups.



6. Conclusion

After introducing the four traditional subfields of anthropology, we need to revisit the question: What is unique about anthropology? First of all, we need to understand the ultimate goal of anthropology, i.e., to discover both similarities and differences among human groups. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, we need to understand what has made us so different on the one hand and what fundamental commonalities are shared by all human beings on the other hand.

As mentioned before, of all the disciplines studying human beings, anthropology has the broadest scope by taking an **interdisciplinary** approach. The quote “both the most scientific of the humanities and the most humanistic of the sciences” (Wolf, 1964, p. 88) best summarizes such interdisciplinary nature. Physical anthropology is more connected with natural sciences; archaeology and cultural anthropology are more concerned with social sciences; and linguistic anthropology is more directly relevant to humanities.

Then, what are the major takeaways from this book? How can we apply cultural anthropology knowledge to real-life situations? The major objective of this book is to help you develop an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity so as to establish a positive attitude towards different cultures in the globalized world. By examining alternative systems of gender, kinship, communication, religion, etc., you will also be able to apply critical thinking to analyze and reflect upon the variety of human lifeways.



Part I Vocabulary

1. Fill in the blanks with the proper words given in the box below. Change the form if necessary. Not every word will be used.

archaeology	anatomy	stocky	excavation	ecofact
pigmentation	rapport	jostle	primate	utterance
supernatural	ritual	coercion	interdisciplinary	

- 1) This dissertation is a(n) _____ study of literature and performing art.
- 2) Pricing is set to get more competitive as banks _____ for business.
- 3) He is the general name of the soldier, strong, _____, and taciturn.
- 4) I have a skin disorder that destroys the _____ of my skin.
- 5) Clinical surgery should be the main research field in clinical _____.
- 6) _____ is a source of history, not just a bumble auxiliary discipline.
- 7) In recent years, sand _____ optionally at river bed has brought trouble to some bridges.
- 8) The use of eye contact in building attraction and _____ was amazing.
- 9) To investigate the roots of laughter, scientists have turned to our _____ cousins.
- 10) The enemy alternated between _____ and temptation, yet the hero never yielded.

2. Match the words or phrases in the left column to the definitions in the right column.

A. primatology
B. linguistic anthropology
C. medical anthropologists
D. economic anthropology
E. features

a. the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services
b. living primates, such as chimpanzees, gorillas, and monkeys
c. the interaction between language and culture
d. house foundation, cave art, and giant Roman columns
e. fighting against AIDS in South Africa

Part II Comprehension

Determine whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F) based on your understanding of the text.

- 1) The central concept in anthropology is the concept of artifact. ()
- 2) Paleoanthropology and primatology are different ways of studying human evolution. ()
- 3) Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead are two pioneer anthropologists who studied how culture influences the psychological make-up of the members of the society. ()
- 4) Historical archaeology analyzes the first stone tools used by humans. ()
- 5) Ecofacts usually provide insights into how human beings interacted with their environment and how they used natural resources. ()

Part III Questions for Discussion

Answer the following questions based on your understanding of the text.

- 1) Which subfield of anthropology interests you the most? And why?
- 2) China has one of the most enduring civilizations in the world. Chinese culture has survived many difficulties such as disunity, conquest, migration, and technological diffusion in its long history. What factors have kept Chinese culture fundamentally intact? In particular, what role has the mentality of “the Middle Kingdom” played in this matter?
- 3) Have you ever been exposed to a culture (via travels, books, TVs, films, or other social media) that has left a deep impression on you? Please share your personal experience with the class and compare it briefly with the culture you are familiar with.

